

THURSDAY
Chicago

OK, the spendy (Oregon localism for costly, pricey) breakfast buffet at the Drake: \$25 is definitely overpriced for someone who thinks a value breakfast is a coupon that gets you two of the new Breakfast Steak and Egg Burritos at McDonald's for \$1.79. [details on my friends and family blog: Chuck & Chow, <http://chuckandchow.tumblr.com>]
] But sometimes you need a big breakfast to power through the day.

I'm torn between several panels at the same time. Really would have liked to have attended one on Avant Garde and Advertising: Experimental Film culture in the Interwar Years, but decide on Where the Minor was Mainstream: The Sponsored, Amateur, Educational, and Experimental Cinemas of Chicago. The presentations are based out of new archival research, and that's a Big Story at this conference. So much great work is being done with the work of the past few decades in assembling new archival collections. These are from the Chicago Film Archives (more accurately Midwest). Andy Uhrich discusses "Shakespeare as Home Movies, Chicago as the Globe: David Bradley's Macbeth (1947) and Julius Caesar (1950)," detailing an attempt to make prestige art films by an economically privileged North Shore ambitious amateur. The Julius Caesar starred a very young Charleton Heston and used Neoclassical Chicago architecture as scenes for a 16mm film with aspirations to enter the big time market (ending up in the education market). Bradley even screened films regularly in his spacious home, advertising in the daily press. This was an example of a beautifully detailed history.

Charles Tepperman followed with "Behind the Scenes at Central Cinematographers: A brief History of Amateur Movie Clubs in Chicago," which spelled out the long standing furry of cinephile movie showing and making in the Windy City. The prestige Chicago Movie Club was a place for very rich people to amuse themselves but opened up a space for another kind of cinema. The Metro Movie Club supplied a more democratic alternative, and Central Cinematographers was a more specialized group that made 4-10 minute movies rotating positions for the group projects. All of these institutions established networks and gave people skills, experiences, and club fun (and especially opened up some space for women to be active.)

Michelle Peutz discussed the 1970s-80s experimental and feminist work of JoAnn Elam who had one foot in political activism and one in the avant garde film community and who screened both in her home as one of the founders of Chicago Filmmakers (which still continues today). Michelle has been the key archivist at Chicago Film Archives for the Elam collection and in talking about it combines an exploratory openness to this under recognized work with a rigorous historical view. [Full disclosure: Michelle and I have worked together on getting the late filmmaker's materials organized for the CFA.]

Judy Hoffman [full disclosure: old friend and comrade in arms in left media work] provided a terrific response: filling in lots of other examples and reminding everyone present of all the other networks and organizations that need to be accounted for. Work around other neighborhoods, the power of the craft unions IATSE's cinematographer and projectionist unions (nepotism and racist/sexist practices), the corruption of the Daley political system (repeat) as well as the Mafia, the connection of art house and art film and softcore porn locally, the grassroots alternatives such as Facets Multimedia and Chicago Filmmakers, production projects such as Kartemquin. Judy reminded everyone that while the mainstream presented itself as "professional," it was the amateurs and alternatives that lived and enacted a "utopian moment": progressives and lefties were part of a network that created its own audiences, distribution and exhibition spaces, training and experience. Clearly, the oral history and memory of participants in these past moments are slipping by, but help us all understand the basis of what happened.

All of this was part of a fluidity of categories that participants remember and took for granted. It was the water they swam in: today's younger historians in going back are looking at the water (sometimes murky) and reconstructing a complex past. I came away from this very charged up for my own paper the next day, but also respecting these critics and investigators who are giving us such a better sense of the past, including folks like Amy Beste whose recent dissertation discussed the influence of the Bauhaus-in-Chicago School of Design, Encyclopedia Britannica Films, and local industrial/advertising houses in the post-war era, and Jackie Stewart's South Side Home Movie project. My take away: this is great foundational work and matches a whole new wave of looking at institutions (think Scott Macdonald's work on experimental film exhibitors, distributors, and so forth and David James' work on non-Hollywood Los Angeles cinema), and alternatives to the Hollywood feature model of understanding cinema.